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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000337

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SUBJECT: HRAZDAN RESIDENTS RALLY FOR JAILED MP

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Classified By: A/DCM ROBERT A. FRAZIER. REASON 1.4 (B/D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Since March 24, residents of Hrazdan have staged daily protests against the arrest and continued detention of Sasun Mikaelian. A Republican member of parliament and Karabakh war hero, Mikaelian supported Levon Ter-Petrosian in the recent Presidential election. Mikaelian appears to enjoy strong support of the local population for his war heroics and service as an elected official. Residents seem particularly incensed that a man who fought for NK and sustained serious injuries has been jailed by leaders of Karabakhi origin. End Summary.

THE RITUAL

2. (C) In the Vanatur district of Hrazdan (about an hour east of Yerevan) residents have since March 24 gathered each afternoon to protest the continued detention of Sasun Mikaelian, who represents Hrazdan in parliament and was one of four MPs stripped of parliamentary immunity on March 4. Mikaelian was ejected from the Republican Party on February 12 after publicly supporting the Presidential candidacy of Levon Ter-Petrosian. He went into hiding after the March 1 crackdown but was arrested on March 12, charged with "usurpation of power" and weapons possession.

3. (C) Emboffs visited Hrazdan on April 10 to review the situation regarding the protests. In what has apparently evolved into a daily ritual, a small group maintains a constant presence at a roadside spot in Vanatur, with a larger gathering each day at 2:00 pm. Police in turn advise the gathered crowd that theirs is an unsanctioned rally (as it has over 100 participants) and orders them to disperse. There was no police presence the day of our visit, though we noticed a car nearby in which protesters claimed NSS officers were observing the proceedings. Police regularly detain some protesters, including on April 7, when they reportedly detained nine hunger strikers, tore down the tents where they were camped out and held them overnight before releasing eight the next day (a ninth continues to be held on a months-old drug possession charge).

4. (C) Demonstrators who spoke to us included a city council member and Mikaelian's sister. Several claimed to have previously been detained, and accused police of mistreating many, hitting them with clubs (one woman showed bruises on her arms) and trying to intimidate them against participating in demonstrations. Intimidation reportedly includes hints at reprisals against them and their family members. These tactics reportedly have had mixed results, with some

participants afraid to return but others emboldened to continue and bring in yet more participants.

15. (C) Although police reportedly have been detaining protesters on a regular basis, the police have at times denied holding any detainees. A crowd that went to the police station on April 7 to demand release of the nine hunger strikers were told that nobody was being held. However, Heritage MP Zaruhi Postanian told Emboff that on April 7 she was speaking to a detainee by phone at the same time that the Hrazdan Police chief was assuring her that nobody was being detained, though he would not permit independent verification.

KIDS OUT OF SCHOOL

16. (C) There were a significant number of children among the protesters. Many parents told us they were afraid of sending them to school, as police had been questioning them (Note: This accords with reports we have heard about police officers going to schools to question students without their parents present. End Note) Local Police Chief Avetik Abrahamian, however, asserted that parents have been keeping their children out of school to attend rallies.

THE MOST BELOVED OF POLITICIANS?

17. (C) Mikaelian appears to be a much-beloved figure in Hrazdan. A former mayor, he is now in his third term as a member of the National Assembly, representing Hrazdan. Residents described him not only as a war hero who sustained grievous wounds (reportedly with about 80 pieces of shrapnel still in his body), but as an unusually helpful and responsive MP. They seemed particularly incensed that a man who had made such a sacrifice for Nagorno Karabakh would be arrested on apparently political grounds by leaders from NK.

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Many seemed nearly as offended by the disrespectful treatment accorded Mikaelian by the NSS during his arrest as by the arrest itself.

HUNGER STRIKE

18. (C) Many of the protesters served under Mikaelian's command in NK and remain fiercely loyal to him, and many of them were among those who had conducted hunger strikes. We met the lone remaining hunger striker, Arshavir Bozinian, a disabled NK war veteran who had served under Mikaelian. While Bozinian said he intended to carry out his strike until Mikaelian was released, on April 12 he suspended it at Mikaelian's request. Our observation was that Bozinian looked surprisingly healthy for a man who reportedly had not eaten for over two weeks. (Note: Bozinian resumed his hunger strike on April 14, joined by the widow of a man killed in NK. End Note)

ONE DEMONSTRATION TELEVISION DID COVER

19. (C) Hearing from residents that Hrazdan TV, a local independent station, had televised some of the protests, we visited the station director, Mnatsakan Harutiunian, who told us he had been covering the rallies regularly and showed us footage from a recent broadcast. It appeared to confirm demonstrator claims about police actions, showing police telling demonstrators to disperse or face the use of force. It also showed demonstrators gathered in front of the police station on April 7, demanding to know the fate of the nine hunger strikers who had been detained, and being told there were no detainees. Harutiunian, an alumnus of an IREX trip to the US in 1996, claims that he tries to be fair in his

coverage, and outlined a long history of his working against government censorship efforts dating back to Soviet times. He reports no trouble from the government for his coverage of opposition activity.

DEMOCRACY FUNCTIONS WITHIN THE SPECIFIC LIMITS OF THE LAW

¶10. (C) Hrazdan Police Chief Avetik Abrahamian discounted the significance of the protests, claiming that most of the demonstrators were relatives and close friends of Mikaelian (Note: We counted over 200 demonstrators on the day of our visit. End Note). While Mikaelian's arrest occurred outside his jurisdiction, Abrahamian defended the arrest and claimed that Mikaelian had been found to be in possession of a significant store of weapons. He asserted that demonstrators were trying to upset public order, and also that these rallies were the wrong way to effect the change they sought. He added, defending the actions of police, that "democracy must function within the specific limits of the law," and that protesters were abusing democracy. He asserted that police have been rather restrained and have faced false accusations from protesters. He also expressed skepticism about the hunger strikers, particularly Arshavir Bozinian, claiming if he was truly 17 days into a hunger strike, he would have been too weak to speak to us

COPS GIVE PROPS TO RFE/RL

¶11. (C) Mikaelian recently wrote an op-ed piece in the opposition newspaper Chorrord Ishkanutiun (Fourth Estate), which Abrahamian termed full of lies. He complained that Mikaelian had slandered his brother. Abrahamian's brother was killed in the NK war, and Mikaelian's article suggests that Abrahamian's deployment of police against demonstrators -- many of them NK veterans -- dishonor his brother's memory. Abrahamian said he no longer speaks to most newspapers, claiming they distort his remarks. He mentioned, however, that he continues to speak to RFE/RL, as they report accurately what he tells them.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) The devotion of Hrazdan residents to Mikaelian and his situation is impressive for its depth and apparent sincerity. Not one resident we met spoke ill of him. While some of this devotion likely reflects a politician's prowess in delivering for his constituents, residents are also deeply angered by the injustice to which they feel he has been subjected, particularly coming as it has from Karabakhis who didn't fight in NK and who should honor his service. We have believed from the outset that Mikaelian's arrest and loss of immunity were politically motivated, and we will be interested to see if the GOAM will move ahead to actually

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bring him to trial.

¶13. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: Among other things, this is an interesting example of the NK war's continuing influence on Armenian politics, a factor which cuts across partisan political lines. Mikaelian is an example of what one often finds in the leading political/economic figures out in the regions. Very often such persons commanded a company or battalion of volunteer soldiers -- often of a unit that they effectively raised themselves from among their local communities -- who went off and fought together during the NK war. If the person was at all successful militarily and/or was wounded in battle, his reputation became permanently symbolic of that community's patriotic sacrifice for the Armenian Cause. Many of the key officeholders at the regional and local level (members of parliament, mayors, regional customs service directors, and others occupying influential and generally lucrative positions) have those

positions as an implicit payback for their war service. Though we do not have detailed knowledge of Mikaelian's practices, in general the fact that such officials are openly corrupt is almost the point -- the ability to skim lucrative illicit profits is, sotto voce, the very mechanism by which the nation is paying back its war heroes for their service. There also seems to be a growing discontent, in that Karabakhis are now perceived to be churlishly dismissing and demeaning the sacrifices that ordinary Armenians made to fight for their freedom.

PENNINGTON